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Dear Fellow Rifle Range Historians,

Permit me to introduce a recent addition to the Aboulafia household: A **Lee-Enfield .303 rifle**. I acquired it recently from Larry Albright's gun shop in Easton, Maryland, after Larry, who once joined the Teal entourage at the Berlin Air Show, told me he had taken delivery of a vintage Lee-Enfield and that I could have this piece of history – great for target shooting too – for \$200. I Googled the markings on the gun, researched its background, and this rifle has a lot to say. With the recently announced shift in DoD priorities to focus on irregular warfare, we can learn from my rifle's history.

My rifle was built in 1925 in Lithgow, Australia, at the Commonwealth Small Arms Factory. At the time, the British empire had largely disarmed after World War One. Long-term strategy and weapons planning were de-emphasized as British and imperial forces were solely engaged in **police actions and counterinsurgency (COIN) conflicts**, most notably in **Iraq**. When war broke out in 1939, the Western powers, particularly Britain, again faced a large, well-armed conventional adversary. As a result of this rude awakening, my rifle probably wound up in a pile of rifles following some terrible defeat in Hong Kong, Singapore or Egypt. Australian troops fought valiantly, but when you're positioned around the globe in small infantry formations with minimal air and naval support, there's little hope against a determined enemy.

This pattern – believing that COIN was the future, and then being surprised by the emergence of a far more serious power – is a depressingly familiar theme in history. When the Lee-Enfield entered service, the British military was large, well-armed, and configured for imperial brush wars and police actions. Between Waterloo and World War One its biggest conflict was the Second Boer War, a classic COIN war (see the movie *Breaker Morant* for a notable COIN scene featuring the Lee-Enfield: When accused of executing Boer prisoners, Morant responds, “we caught them and shot them under **Rule .303**”). Yet twenty years after the original Lee-Enfield entered service, the same British military faced a very different threat. Rowan Atkinson's *Captain Blackadder* said it best: “I'd had fifteen years of military experience, perfecting the art of ordering a pink gin and [propositioning women] in Swahili, and then suddenly four-and-a-half million heavily armed Germans hove into view. That was a shock, I can tell you.”

After World War Two, the US committed prodigious resources to fight pajama-clad communist guerillas in a far away jungle, even as Soviet power grew as a serious menace to Western Europe. To this day, many people believe that the Vietnam debate was about COIN technique, and how the US could have won, rather than the **far more important debate** about whether Vietnam was a better use of resources than **defending the West against a conventional threat**. The Vietnam debate has become an emotional and political litmus test, rather than a useful lesson about the dangers of being strategically diverted by COIN.

Here's how the pattern starts. Following a war (the Napoleonic Wars, World Wars One and Two, Korea, the Cold War, etc.), it becomes “obvious” to many people that big enemies have been permanently vanquished, and that there are no more near-peer adversaries. It's even more “obvious” that given global security needs and resource constraints, weapons and force structure decisions should cater primarily to COIN. I'd call this pattern **The COIN Delusion**. (Attention *New York Times Magazine* annual **Year In Ideas** issue editor: I await your call.) This delusion results in strategic surprise when a conventional adversary emerges.

Meanwhile, the same people who think taking over countries is a bad idea are frequently swept off their feet by the **sheer sexiness of COIN**. It doesn't hurt that COIN is an exciting concept, connoting political change, rebellion, counter-establishment thinking, and nonconformity. As in the computer commercials, **conventional warfare advocates** would look like the **PC**, and **COIN advocates** would look like the **Mac**. COIN is

usually promoted by smart and charismatic avatars who are great at branding their ideas (i.e., General Petraeus), but just as often it's practiced as a brutal (sometimes necessary) evil by less noble characters (i.e., Colonel Kurtz).

The next thing my Lee-Enfield has to say concerns **strategic planning and the industrial base**. The Lithgow factory that built my rifle was a notable asset for Australia (see <http://militaryguns.net.au/content/view/45/105/>). It really mattered that they could build their own rifles, a simple weapon by today's standards. As recently as World War Two, rifles were a major factor in defense industrial planning. Roosevelt's Lend-Lease package included 50,000 badly needed rifles. Yet setting up a rifle factory was a relatively simple affair, and if they shut it down they could easily bring it back. Setting up the capability to design, integrate, and produce a modern aircraft, ship or missile system is a far more complex undertaking. Once you lose that capability, it's incredibly expensive to bring it back.

Combine these two lessons, and you see how The COIN Delusion might produce some **serious industrial base damage**. Take PBD 753, the budget directive that tried to kill the C-130J. Many aspects of Rumsfeld's amateurish SecDef reign bordered on tragicomic, but this was a uniquely dim moment. As resources shifted to irregular warfare in Iraq, PBD 753 tried to kill the C-130J's MYP contract, before someone informed Rumsfeld that the whole point of an MYP contract was to be un-killable, and violating its terms would be prohibitively expensive.

Fast forward to the FY 2010 budget. Pretty much every branch of the military has suddenly realized they've got aging C-130 fleets, and they now need C-130Js with every conceivable letter appended: KC-130J tankers, H/MC-130J special operations tankers, AC-130J gunships, basic C-130Js lifters, and the list goes on. The new budget plan will fund scores of them. Meanwhile, the A400M's delay (or collapse) means a large and growing export market for the Herc. Think about the **ramifications if PBD 753 had succeeded**. It would have taken billions of dollars to re-create the C-130 (plus billions in lost export revenue) and years of work to **reverse a short-sighted decision** taken to save cash on a conventional weapon to pay for COIN weapons.

Yet here we have the Bush and Obama Administrations both killing the C-17 and F-22, with remarkably little strategic thought. I'm not arguing that the C-17 or F-22 lines shouldn't be shut down. It's possible that the US has enough of them, or that the alternatives are acceptable (industrial base decisions are a poor rationale for closing the borders, and international alternatives should be considered too). I'd just like DoD to do a study of strategic requirements and capabilities (the Quadrennial Defense Review, etc.) before making important decisions like these. Without these studies, destroying aircraft production lines looks short-sighted, as with PBD 753. Making major weapons decisions without strategic analysis is putting the cart before the horse.

In the absence of strategic thinking and leadership, there are people – otherwise smart, responsible adults – who say the F-22 and other weapons are irrelevant because “we haven't even used them in Iraq or Afghanistan.” This represents a confluence of **The COIN Delusion** (“We'll never face another peer adversary, so why buy weapons to fight one?”) and **PBD 753 short-sightedness** (“We can kill programs and not care about the industrial base if there's no immediate need for them.”). Horribly, the Republican opposition is more focused on terrorist boogymen, and less focused on creating an awareness of the dangers of disarmament.

So, strategic advice from my Lee-Enfield: beware **The COIN Delusion**, and don't use COIN as a flabby rationale for **irreversible industrial base decisions made without strategic planning**.

This month's aircraft reports add FY 2010 budget numbers to the F-35, C-130, UH-60, SH/MH-60, CH-53, V-22, E-2, AV-8B, T-45, and P-3 reports. We've also updated the ATR, A310, MD Explorer, Hawk, MB.339, and ATL.2 reports. And I'm off to Le Bourget, where an F-22 will fly overhead, making history in what might well be remembered as a final hurrah. I hope to see you there.

Yours, 'Til Someone Calls And Wants Their Lee-Enfield (#B12542) Back,
Richard Aboulafia